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Main Article

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Careful consumption and aspirational ethics in the media and cultural industries: Cancelling, quitting, screening, optimising

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Abstract

We are witnessing an era of increased intensity of consumer activism (and its discontents) within the arts, cultural and media industries. Ethical, radical, activist and even 'woke' consumer interests are now actively catered to across almost all goods and services, from food, fashion and fast-moving consumer goods to tourism, transport and finance. The aim of this paper is to analyse another field where these practices have recently focussed – the media and cultural industries. Drawing on interviews with 20 self-identified feminist and ethical consumers, this article examines how hyperconscious ethical consumption of cultural and media content is lived out and experienced as *careful consumption*. How are these careful audience activities described, rationalised and understood by the interview participants? What deliberative processes do they undertake and how does that guide them to certain conclusions about what media, art and culture they are willing to watch or not, where they draw the line, and why? This article shows how perceptions of consumer choice, responsibility and culpability are being channelled into an aspirational ethics, involving forms of self-improvement, self-care and self-control such as screening and filtering content, 'cancelling' and boycotting media, and attempts to correct, optimise and diversify our tastes and interests.

Keywords

aspirational ethics, cancel culture, cancelling, careful consumers, careful consumption, consumer culture, cultural industries, ethical consumers, gender, media industries

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Introduction

> It's almost like people are becoming more discriminating of like, is this chicken organic? Was it made under fair circumstances?. . . Like I couldn't watch *The Shining* now. I think knowing the circumstances under which Shelley Duvall was traumatized to get that piece of work, I just don't think it's justifiable, and I couldn't watch it now. (Alice)

We are witnessing an era of increased intensity of consumer activism (and its discontents) within the arts, cultural and media industries. While the field of cultural production is no stranger to culture wars or moral panics, it *has* traditionally sat outside or at least on the margins of contemporary 'ethical consumption'. This paper aims to document and analyse these emerging hyperconscious audience practices – including the much maligned 'cancelling', as well as a range other screening, filtering and self-improvement practices – all of which sit at the nexus of taste, ethical consumption, digital activism, feminist ethics of care, and cultural and identity politics. Consumer activism is as old as the term 'consumer' itself, but has drastically expanded and intensified since the emergence of fair trade and ethical consumer discourses in the late 1980s. As these activities have continued to surge they have taken on new, distinctive formations – variously dubbed 'political consumerism' (Micheletti, 2003), 'radical consumption' and 'caring consumers' (Littler, 2008), 'consumerized-citizen' (Barnett et al., 2010) and 'commodity activism' (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser, 2012). The hallmark rhetoric of ethical consumerism – transparency, accountability, sustainability, fairness and most recently 'care' (Sobande, 2020) – have become ubiquitous across mainstream marketing and branding. This goes beyond merely greenwashing or the corporate co-option of social justice concerns, and instead demonstrates how comprehensively we now exist in an era of 'market-embedded morality' (Shamir, 2008). Ethical, radical, activist and now 'woke' (Kanai and Gill, 2020) consumer interests are, for better and worse, actively catered to and produced across almost all goods and services: food, fashion and fast-moving consumer goods, health and wellbeing, architecture and construction, tourism and hospitality, banking and finance, appliances and transport. The aim of this paper is to expand these discussions to incorporate another domain where these practices have recently focussed – the media and cultural industries.

Over the last decade we have seen the emergence of high-profile new audience and gatekeeper practices that focus on the morality and ethics of the media and cultural industries – centring most often on matters of gender, race and sexuality. Earlier moral boycott campaigns typically responded to concerns about immoral, age-inappropriate or transgressive content (usually relating to sex, vice, violence and blasphemy) and fears about the effect of such representations on audiences. Moral concerns which were once principally about *representation* and *reception* have now given way to concerns about *production, distribution* and *consumption.* In its simplest, this might be summarised as the difference between the campaigning of Christian lobby groups who lead boycotts against the Walt Disney conglomerate throughout the 1990s over their concerns about declining standards of family values represented in the company's film and television titles, compared with the 2020 #BoycottMulan campaign against Disney and the stars of the live action film *Mulan* for their perceived complicity with the Chinese Government's

human rights violations against minority groups in Xinjiang (where parts of the film were shot). Of course, there are still significant concerns about representation (or lack thereof), but these too are increasingly understood as being the outcome of underlying structural inequalities within the contexts and cultures of production (e.g. 'lack of diversity in the writer's room' type critiques).

At their most high profile, these new hyperconscious audience practices take the form of what is sometimes dubbed 'cancel culture', incorporating forms of socially networked efforts to 'mute', deny, block or de-platform specific media personalities, artists or organisations. More often, though, they take the form of quite personal and individualised efforts to boycott, avoid and disengage from certain cultural entities or to scrutinise, monitor and improve our cultural consumption habits – to #readmorewomen or 'decolonise Netflix'. Building on Littler's (2008) suggestion that we are increasingly invited to be 'cosmopolitan *caring* consumers', I argue that we can observe in these new audience activities around media and cultural content, the emergence of the *careful consumer*. As this paper will show, careful consumers *care* about the conditions and contexts under which media and culture is made and circulated, including the hierarchies of power and control they help to maintain. We are also very *careful* about what media and culture we consume and how we rationalise those choices among close-knit and wider communities. In shifting Littler's term – from caring to *careful* consumption – I hope to capture a greater sense of the reflexiveness, aspiration and curiosity but also exhaustion, guilt and anxiety attached to these desires to be ethical.

In the following paper, I provide an overview of the different activities that have emerged with these new, careful consumer shifts among audiences for popular culture and media. The insights offered in this paper are drawn from 20 in-depth interviews (on average 60 minutes) with Australian-based media and cultural consumers. The participants were recruited via posts shared on social media networks as well as snowballing referrals. Located in urban and regional Australia, the 20 respondents come from a range of backgrounds, genders, ages (from early 20s to early 70s), nationalities and ethnic identities, but in keeping with long-term trends in 'ethical consumerism' and also 'aspirational consumerism' most were women with advanced education (Currid-Halkett, 2017; Micheletti, 2004). All interviewees are anonymised by way of a pseudonym and I have included background information about the participants only where it is necessary to understand a specific statement. The 20 interviews examined here form part of a broader pilot research project examining the different ways – good, bad, ambivalent – the arts, media and cultural industries have responded to increased public scrutiny and concern for issues relating to gender equality in recent years. A key aim of this research has been to better understand the impacts of #metoo and popular feminist movements on audience behaviours and patterns of consumption. For this wider project, I have also spoken with cultural workers about their experiences, but for this paper I draw exclusively on the 20 interviews I conducted with Australian media and cultural consumers. This is a non-representative sample of people who self-identified both as feminists and as making ethical choices about the culture they engage with, and much of the conversation centred on responses to #metoo and related popular feminist movements. This study therefore doesn't make claims about broad population-wide trends, but it does aim to help us better understand how people are responding to moral feelings about art and

culture, how they deliberate on these considerations and how they are making ethical choices as audiences and consumers.

This paper seeks to move the conversation beyond the current popular obsession with 'cancel culture', which I see as a reductive and highly selective fixation. Instead, I want to broaden our awareness and understanding of much more routine careful consumer activities – what I have dubbed screening, avoiding, quitting and aspirational or optimised consumption. I also analyse the distinctive ways these activities are described, rationalised and understood by those involved in practicing them. What deliberative processes do they undertake and how does that guide them to certain choices or conclusions about what media, art or culture they are willing to watch or not, where they draw the line, and why? In their responses we can see how perceptions of consumer choice, responsibility and culpability produce sensations of exhaustion, frustration, guilt, anxiety, discomfort and dissonance, which are in turn channelled into a range of self-improvement and self-care activities, such as screening and filtering content, cancelling and boycotting media, as well as efforts to track, study and correct their interests. Finally there are more ambivalent and contradictory developments as ethical deliberation – in particular the desire to support diverse voices and perspectives – intersects with more established practices of distinction and aspirational consumption.

Markets for virtue and the moralisation of the markets

Ethical deliberation and moral evaluations are profoundly shaping our current engagement with art, media and culture, orbiting around a few key questions: What relationship should a maker have with their subjects, collaborators, fellow creatives and even their audience? What obligations does an author have to the communities and groups they're representing? What are we supposed to do when producers and works violate these expectations? As with previous iterations of the 'culture wars' (in Australia the 'history wars') these concerns are positioned by much of the media and political discourse as 'elite'; the domain of 'SJWs' and the 'PC police'. But to be very clear, these are not radical, elite or even new questions to ask of our art or culture. These are questions which have played a vital role in the histories and traditions of journalism, documentary, community arts, community media, cultural development, art therapy, neo realism, relational aesthetics, socially engaged practice and so on. In a great many traditions of contemporary art, media and culture, our evaluations of *good* work are intractably bound up with our evaluations of *good* people – encompassing the ethics of behind-the-scenes production processes and the moral responsibility of makers to regard the people, communities, environments and social bonds that underpin a work. Put simply, attentiveness to the morality of individual artists and the ethics of how media or creative texts are produced is nothing new. There is a rich history – critical, academic, creative, even industrial – to the desire for more ethical forms of artistic and media production. That being said, these considerations and reflections are now being much more intensively applied to the breadth of commercial media and cultural texts. Like Alice says of today's media and cultural consumption landscape – *people are becoming more discriminating of like, is this chicken organic? Was it made under fair circumstances?* As these concerns are mainstreamed and applied not just to relatively niche forms of festival cinema, indie

music or community arts, but equally to the production of commercial media – fiction TV series, top 40 pop songs, YA books, Hollywood blockbusters – it becomes necessary to consider the activities of contemporary media audiences through the paradigm of 'ethical consumerism'.

Critical analysis of ethical consumer discourses tends to be theorised by way of two (interrelated) concepts: the expansion of 'markets for virtue' (Vogel, 2005) and the intensified 'moralisation of markets' (Shamir, 2008). The first describes the processes by which various social and ecological concerns come to be folded into existing patterns of contemporary consumer culture (pleasure, distinction and self-reflexive identity construction). In these accounts, critiques of capitalism – human rights abuses, environmental devastation, globalised labour exploitation – are incorporated and sold back to consumers via branding, PR spin and an ever-growing array of niche consumer goods catering to ethical lifestyles. The other major theoretical thrust of this literature concerns the 'moralisation of markets' (Shamir, 2008). Neo-Foucauldian in approach, this scholarship has focussed on the ways that ethical consumer discourses 'responsibilise' action on social justice and environmental concerns, and are broadly illustrative of a neoliberal governmentality that has limited our ability to imagine remedies beyond consumer behaviour nudges. Analyses of environmentalism (Maniates, 2001), recycling (Jones, 2010), plastic bag bans (Hawkins, 2009), food activism (Guthman, 2008), locavores (Blue, 2009) and many other ethical consumer trends, have examined how we, as individuals, are constantly called upon to care for the planet and to take personal responsibility for our unsustainable lifestyles and destructive consumer choices. In this study, I move from the more familiar ethical consumer terrain of plastic bags, sweatshop labour and factory farming to a seemingly very different domain – the consumption of art, popular culture and commercial media. But as I will go on to show below, many of these discursive repertoires and affective patterns of responsibilisation, self-regulation and self-chastisement remain. As Barnett et al. (2010) argue, 'registers of responsibility' now permeate not just designated 'ethical' goods but *all* forms of consumption. Consumption writ-large has become 'a surface for the "ethical problematisation" of the self' (Barnett et al., 2010: 113) and this extends to the choices that audiences make about who or what we will regard, read, watch, listen to and buy.

More recently, there has been a shift within the literature to examine the messier terrain of 'actually existing' neoliberal subjectivities and government (Barnett et al., 2010, see also Thompson and Kumar, 2021). Barnett et al. (2010) argue that critical analysis of ethical consumer discourses and theories of governance as it relates to ethical consumption need to consider more fully the actual experience of interpellation. In responding to this challenge I draw on feminist and queer scholarship which has theorised the embodied nature of subjectivity. I take inspiration and insights from analyses of 'affective practices' (Wetherell, 2012), in particular, how emotions are ordered and oriented towards others (Ahmed, 2004, 2006), how they are mediated and managed (Gill and Kanai, 2018; Gill and Scharff, 2011), how they might confer distinctiveness (Allen, 2014; Skeggs, 2004, 2010), how they are made productive as forms of affective labour (Duffy, 2016; Gill and Pratt, 2008; Gregg, 2009), even if that labour is sometimes 'unwanted' (Nakamura, 2015), but also how they might generate forms of affective dissonance and solidarity (Hemmings, 2012). The starting place for this research project was the impact

of #metoo and our current popular feminist moment on the experiences of audiences (and cultural workers, another article). Hence one particularly useful line of analysis within this scholarship has examined the gendered dimensions of responsibilisation within the 'psychic landscape' or 'psych-logic' of neoliberalism. This work has examined how women are both *called upon to be* and *empirically talk of themselves as being* aspirational, resilient and self-enterprising individuals who take personal responsibility for managing gender inequalities, their own oppression and perceived failures, and their feelings about such experiences (Allen, 2014; Gill and Scharff, 2011; McRobbie, 2020; Orgad, 2019; Scharff, 2016, 2021). In the following paragraphs I draw together these threads in the scholarly literature to show how hyperconscious, careful consumers negotiate contradictory and manifold pressures to be committed fans, distinctive cultural connoisseurs, caring individuals, 'good feminists' and empowered ethical consumers.

Discomforting choices

> Maybe about five years ago it used to take up a lot of my time. I couldn't watch anything without examining it and getting distressed about it and getting upset about it. Now I feel less upset because I feel as a consumer we can make choices. (Isabella)

When reflecting on what media and cultural texts they will or won't consume now, the participants I spoke with routinely described embodied reactions: sensations of 'discomfort' or of being 'on guard' and 'on edge', of mental 'conflict' or 'struggle', of feeling 'yucky' or 'icky'. The interviews usually centred on the participant's reactions to stories of sexual abuse in the media and cultural industries, but they also regularly touched on concerns about homophobia, transphobia, racism and on anti-corporate critiques of media groups like News Corp, Amazon and Disney. The sensations of discomfort they describe vary in intensity, from a niggling distraction that takes them out of the moment or a lingering bad taste that ruins the pleasure of a text, through to feelings of guilt about their perceived complicity in continuing to enable or reward a person or company they think is deeply unethical (even criminal), and at times distress at being reminded of victims or crimes.

Participants repeatedly say they feel *unable* to watch or listen to a given artist or text anymore, including ones that were once much adored.

> I feel uncomfortable in the sense that I feel like I'm supporting them in a way. And like I'm giving them a platform that they shouldn't be having. Even some of the stuff that I've consumed before, the fact that we've contributed in a way to them being in that position. . . so yeah, that's what I mean by making me uncomfortable. (Anika)

Anika, and others I spoke to, describe being disturbed from their straightforward enjoyment of a text by a heightened awareness of the people and systems behind what they're consuming, which makes them re-read the text and pay extra careful attention to ideological elements or sensibilities they once excused as being risqué or ironic, or simply didn't notice. Antonia talks of her dwindling enjoyment of Woody Allen as a 'slow dawn over about a decade', and that she now feels 'shameful' about how long she defended

him (principally to herself, in her own mind). 'But now, knowing some of the things that I know now, it's just really hard to ignore. Those things that were in many ways, the hallmarks of his films, become really disturbing'. She goes on:

> The only reason that I'd watch a film of his now, would be with a very critical lens. With a critical hat on. I would feel stressed, slightly resentful, but I'd watch it in order to possibly learn more about the reality that I may have missed when I thought he was just this excellent film-maker, without some of the things that later came to light. (Antonia)

Rob says much the same of his relationship with Allen and *Annie Hall*, once his favourite film, 'I'm always on guard, I guess, to some new revelation in a piece of dialogue or thinking, ah, or I'm the idiot for not seeing it earlier'.

Many of the participants give accounts of current, retrospective, hypothetical and even future feelings of discomfort and agitation, including guilt, shame, worry and stress. Often these accounts are delivered playfully and with a sense of dark humour about their experiences, but the pervasiveness of these sensations strikes me as exhausting. Participants feel guilty *while* consuming a specific text, in the moment, or they *anticipate* feeling that way were they to actually sit down and consume something they've been 'actively avoiding', or if they were to do so with others who might judge them. They sometimes feel bad about their *past* patterns of consumption and what that says about them *now*. Participants describe feeling guilty when they *are* able to enjoy a text by someone problematic in the moment, returning to the discomfort and self-rapprochement after the fact. Or they feel bad that they will be seen as 'the feminist killjoy' (Ahmed, 2010) who can't *separate the art from the artist* anymore the way a 'good' cultural connoisseur should be able to. As Yasmin says, 'I feel like I'm also that person who will be like, "Oh, did you know this band had some allegations against them?" And be the party pooper'. They feel sheepish when they realise they were most concerned about the loss of their own pleasure or enjoyment, or when they think they are being hypocritical in their decisions. They worry about personally supporting undeserving artists, not just via direct economic benefits but by less tangible contributions to the conferral of status onto objects and individuals within the cultural industries. Some of the participants also worry about possible future revelations. 'Often I'm just waiting to hear the bad news. . . I'm dreading the day that I hear anything' (Heather). Even when these statements are delivered in a more humorous register or with a dose of irony (as they often were), it still contributes to a sense that potentially nothing of art or culture that is cherished, or the personal identities and histories shaped by them, is safe any longer. The way to ease the unease and to 'feel less upset' is, as Isabel says, to make better choices as a consumer.

Beyond cancelling

> The main idea is not that I don't want to give you money, it's just that I don't want to listen to your music at all, like hearing your voice is probably uncomfortable to the people who've been like their victims and stuff like that, really so it just comes from that base. Like imagine that person having to listen to this voice on a regular basis on the radio or someone else's playlist. I don't want to contribute to that sort of a culture at all so that's where it comes from. (Anika)

Sensations of discomfort, conflict, guilt, worry are then channelled into different practices of self-regulation and self-control. This routinely includes forms of avoiding, quitting, screening and other activities in the vein of what is often referred to as 'cancelling'. In her etymology of the term, Clark (2020: 88) defines cancelling as 'an expression of agency, a choice to withdraw one's attention from someone or something whose values, (in)action, or speech are so offensive, one no longer wishes to grace them with their presence, time and money'. It is, says Clark (2020: 88), a 'discursive accountability praxis', originating in the digital counter publics of Black Twitter and a continuation of 'reading', 'dragging' 'calling out' and 'calling in' which are rooted in Black and queer vernacular traditions. To look at an organised example such as the #MuteRKelly campaign, cancelling encompasses activities that are much the same as those long used in consumer politics campaigns – boycotting, petitions, protests, public naming and shaming of those who benefit from complicity, and direct lobbying of radio stations, sponsors, publishers, venues, funders and creative collaborators. But what Clark's definition effectively captures is how cancelling is also an *emotional and intellectual re-orientation*. To continue with the example of #MuteRKelly, cancelling therefore extends beyond the realm of conventional consumer politics to encompass the refusal to dance to one of R Kelly's tracks at a party, switching radio stations, blocking him on streaming services, removing him from playlists, and generally refusing to take pleasure from a text as intended and culturally anticipated, that is, to be the 'killjoy'.

In keeping with this notion of reorientation, most of the participants I spoke with talk of 'actively avoiding' or 'not actively consuming' certain works, abstaining from texts by a given artist, unfollowing them on social media, removing them from playlists and watch lists, as well as screening new texts and artists and interests for potential problems. The reasoning that underpins these actions varies between participants, and often they describe multiple rationales. Some participants have taken part in coordinated boycotts, such as #MuteRKelly, but more commonly they demonstrate personal efforts to avoid an artist/text or to try and ensure that money and attention won't flow back to companies, artists or producers of texts they feel are deeply unethical or immoral. For example, some participants use piracy, VPNs, ad blockers and the like to avoid contributing revenue. According to Heather, 'I might consume it if I can online but I choose not to use my money to purchase it'. While Avery says they would recommend problem texts/authors to others but 'with my little caveat of *pirate it*'. In some cases, as shown in Anika's quote from above, this involves a reorientation that more closely matches the concept of 'cancelling' as defined by Clark (2020) – *I don't want to contribute to that sort of a culture at all*. For example, as Jonathan says of avoiding Woody Allen films, 'it's not just about giving the person who you think is unethical in some major way money, but it's also about money sending a signal to the people who are producing this work. [. . .] This is a money-making enterprise, and it's a way of signalling that actually no, I'm not part of the audience for this, I don't want to be part of this exercise'.

At other times, the accounts offered by the participants are less clear in their motivations or intentions. Rather than specifically wanting to deny attention in a more coordinated or purposeful way, these activities are better described as *avoiding, quitting, screening* and *abstaining*. Asked whether she would describe what she is doing as 'boycotting', Mia says:

> I don't know if I would say I'm boycotting. I guess I feel like boycotting is more of an active thing. Whereas when I find out that an artist is someone that I don't align with, I just lose interest in wanting to, I guess, involve myself in anything that they're doing. (Mia)

Like Mia, many participants describe undertaking activities that they see as being less *active* (than what they imagine boycotting or 'cancelling' to be). They say instead that they 'lost interest', 'moved on', 'disengaged' or that they simply 'stopped listening' to, or 'stopped watching' something. Sometimes the participants try (and fail) to 'quit' an artist or work that they once loved but feel compelled to cease promoting or engaging with. Super fans like Lucretia have to figure out what to do with all their merch:

> I've put all my Harry Potter stuff away. Oh look, I have maybe worn my Gryffindor cardie twice since then. A good, warm cardie is that, unfortunately. But I don't wear it as much as I used to. (Lucretia)

They might watch or listen to *less* of their 'problematic faves' or do so less 'actively' (no purchases but it's okay if it gets played at a wedding). Or they make choices about better or worse texts from an artist's oeuvre (old favourites but nothing new; collaborations nothing solo). Rather than boycott specifically, participants might just reduce their spending – 'I think I would be much more reluctant to spend money on something, or I would at least try to not spend money on it, right? Or *in a less active way*, right' (Emma). In these accounts, the primary motivation seems to be closer to a desire to avoid, assuage or merely *live with* the feelings of discomfort and guilt now associated with these cultural figures and texts.

Sitting behind these decisions, tends to be a series of filtering processes as the participants try to figure out how to optimally, efficiently and authentically screen out problem names and texts. Some participants identified websites, browser plugins, apps and social media accounts. Rotten Apples, for example, is a website that lets you background check film and tv titles, designating them 'rotten' or 'fresh' and providing links to articles about sexual misconduct allegations for key personnel involved. Shinigami Eyes is a browser extension that colour codes transphobic (red) and trans-friendly (green) comments and accounts. As Shinigami Eyes user Lauren says, 'I like it because it kind of echoes the processes that I myself go through but has kind of made it a little bit easier for me. I trust the makers of this extension to basically get it right. . .' In other words, the extension makes it easier to carry out a vetting process she was *already doing*. According to Alice, 'I think definitely there's a lot of editing going on before I'm consuming anything these days' but she also goes on to explain the process in these ways:

> So, if somebody is making like transphobic slurs, like musicians . . . it's pretty low stakes to sift out things like that. I don't do a lot of digging when it comes to music and things like that come out so quickly, like for instance, on Twitter. (Alice)

Likewise Lakshmi, who used to work in the film industries, says that she 'actively looks for information' about the background of a given artist.

> I usually do have a habit of probably looking through the background simply because I come from a film background so it's interesting for me how it's been made. It's just that this time I notice a lot more about the personal lives but I don't think it takes a huge chunk of my time. (Lakshmi)

In these accounts, participants describe ongoing background monitoring of the cultural landscape for ugly news, but they also offer reassurances that this filtering is easier to do these days, not a big deal, *low stakes* and more of a *habit* than anything too labour intensive or regimented. It's 'just a matter of removing a few artists or adding a few artists when you hear something about them. I don't find it too time-consuming' (Anika). Screening and filtering activities are also framed as authentically in keeping with one's other interests, processes and values, that is, in keeping with the way Lauren already processed transphobic content, or the way Alice usually finds out about music news, or the way Lakshmi has always been professionally interested in film production news. All of which has the effect of downplaying the scale or extremity of what's involved in these processes of monitoring, filtering and screening content, and thereby eliding the potential association with the 'feminist killjoy' (Ahmed, 2010) or the 'unwanted labour' of women of colour (Nakamura, 2015).

Clark's definition of 'cancelling' – to withdraw one's attention – is a far cry from how the term is used most often at present in popular discourse. As Clark (2020: 88) documents, 'cancelling' has been appropriated, distorted and rebadged as 'the reductive and malignant label cancel culture'. Both terms are now used across the political spectrum to gesture more broadly to 'morally motivated networked harassment' (Marwick, 2021), incorporating concepts of 'Twitter mobs', online bullying, trolling, shaming and pile-ons, which take place within the context of a social media ecology that amplifies and rewards conflict (Elerding, 2018). This – just so we're very clear – is substantially different from many of the activities described by the interviewees I spoke with. 'Cancel culture' is now most often characterised as a strategy to aggressively police what culture others take pleasure from, to censor any content which offends, to block or ''de-platform'' anyone who has ever transgressed (contemporary) moral norms, however unintentionally or modestly. But most of the interviewees I spoke with have merely decided that they will not pay (as much) attention to an artist or text anymore, and on occasion they talk with others about that decision, and the rationale and feelings which sit behind it. Sometimes those conversations happen on social media, such as through a statement of support, a retweet, a shared article, but more often not, because most of the participants I spoke with don't want to put their 'head above the firing line' (Marion). They too are deeply wary of the risks, scrutiny and hostility that comes with engaging in these conversations on social media.

With the baggage now attached to the notion of 'cancelling', it's unsurprising that most participants were unwilling to identify with the term on any level. Few used it at all in the interviews to talk about their activities and when it did emerge, most saw it as 'unhelpful', an example of people going 'too far': 'Like in the US they use it a lot, "cancelled" – that's a bit intense', says Isabella. At other points they used the term in ironic ways, with participants both admitting to and distancing themselves from the term: 'I guess we have "cancelled" Michael Jackson in our house', says Alice with an eye roll

and scare quotes, of her household's efforts to eliminate MJ from the family Spotify account. Participants also say they are careful to avoid shaming or censoring others, not wanting to be seen to dictate to friends and family what they should be doing. Likewise Antonia says, 'This is going to sound really wrong, but we can't all be perfect. It's really important to protect people from being cancelled'. While social media is identified as the primary source of finding out about new ethical quandaries, most participants are reluctant to discuss their feelings and ethical considerations on social media, except within the sphere of their immediate friendship circles – mostly out of fear and a desire to avoid direct engagement in any online hostility. Of those who *are* more active and more public on social media around these issues – sharing links to commentary pieces and news stories, expressing solidarity, retweeting perspectives or voices they think are important to be heard, responding to criticism – they emphasise their civility, calmness and lack of intensity. For example: 'I feel you need to put in an effort on being more, I guess, nicer and a bit calmer' (Isabella) or 'I don't tend to grandstand because I feel like there's also something yucky about people who get too performative and it seems slick' (Lauren). In all these ways participants explicitly and implicitly disavow the term and express discomfort with its associations.

Aspirational ethics

> Definitely, I am actively interested in reading or listening or watching work by people who are people of colour and women and non-binary and trans people. (Emma)

As much as the interview participants described turning away, screening out or cutting back, they also described *actively* seeking out content which they *aspire* to consume more of. Statements like Emma's were common. Interviewees described how they were trying to challenge and ultimately improve their more ingrained cultural consumption habits. For many this reflection was attached to the increased visibility of feminist, trans-inclusive and anti-racist commentary in the popular media. For example, Thomas says that at about the time of #metoo and the Louis CK revelations, he realised he was only really watching male comedians:

> I do remember thinking, wow, there aren't really any women comedians who I go out of my way to watch. I did actually spend a bit of time thinking about that and looking at that. And I have to say, were it not for doing that I wouldn't have come across Tig Notaro, who I really, really like now. And who is someone who I would actually go out of my way to watch. (Thomas)

Thomas spent time exploring and ultimately trying to correct his bias by cultivating new interests and researching comedians. The visibility of Black Lives Matter proved another common catalyst for these behaviour changes. Lucretia, who had already decided to read only queer books, says she 'consciously expanded' the amount of writing by queer women of colour that she was reading because, 'I felt like I wasn't in touch with one of the most important things that was happening in the world'.

As they did with their efforts to avoid or screen out content, participants draw on a range of techniques and technologies in pursuit of these diversification quests. Online

listicles, algorithmic recommendations, thematic categories, curated playlists, recommended reading lists and following women, trans, non-binary and non-white cultural intermediaries on social media (curators, critics, commentators) are routine methods. Personal diaries and logs are also common. Yasmin and Jonathan, for example, both use the cinephile social media/tracking app Letterboxd to monitor what films they've been watching. Yasmin initially engaged with the popular '52 Films by Women' challenge, but has outgrown that. She boasts happily, 'I feel like every year I'm doing slightly better. [. . .] I'm actually doing more than 52 movies a year, so it's working I think'. Meanwhile Jonathan used Letterboxd to document every film he's ever watched, a reflexive process that allowed him to spot patterns, 'you can see, like what I'm actually viewing and you can kind of break it down by gender, by language, by place, whatever it is. [. . .] I found that useful particularly in trying not to watch films made by men so much'.

While these considerations take place across art forms and genres, it was books and reading lists where they played out most often. To me this clearly demonstrates the link between careful audience activities and a drive for self-improvement and self-education. As Barnett et al. (2010) would see it, the participants scrutinise and problematise their own consumer conduct, making a 'project' of their ethical selves. As Mia says, 'I feel like I can *learn a lot more* from people whose experiences are just vastly different to mine'. At the same time, many participants were also wary of the instrumentalisation of 'other' experiences. So as Emma goes on to explain, 'I'm also very aware that there's this ultimately pretty exploitative and racist or sexist trend of only reading or watching or listening to work produced by people of colour or women just to be like "I'm learning, I need to learn something"'. Likewise Heather insists, 'I'm really particular about having that spectrum and I mean in a meaningful way, not in a 'oh shit, we haven't looked at this'. I try really hard to be very genuine about it.' In other words, in response to ethical reflections about their choices and tastes as media and cultural consumers, audiences try to *do better*, only for these self-improvement aspirations to become sites of further worry and guilt.

The final observation I want to make here is the way ethical considerations and aspirations are folded into broader patterns of cultural connoisseurship and distinctiveness. Yasmin, who both uses and worries about her tracking of identity categories on Letterboxd, hopes that eventually she will no longer need the device or other similar prompts to consume like this quite so 'intentionally'. She wants instead to 'normalise' these practices and to not think about them too much. As was the case with screening practices, these self-improvement activities are spoken of as if they *should be* or *already are* in keeping with people's authentic tastes and interests. Participants sometimes observe that their interests have 'diversified unintentionally' (Mia) or are merely extensions of what they were already doing, 'I think it's always been part of who I am, and it's just become more and more clearly the case' (Astrid). They are also entangled with notions of taste, such that openness, curiosity, expansiveness and a cosmopolitan omnivoressness (Chan, 2019) are understood to be desirable modes of consumption that any self-respecting cultural connoisseur should aspire to. As Gary says, 'you'd be stupid to just have the same old shit that you have all the time'.

Careful consumption

The accounts that I've outlined above reveal recurring patterns, practices and sequencing in how audiences both feel and think through ethical considerations as they relate to the consumption of media and cultural texts. I argue that these patterns and practices – feeling discomfort and worry, turning *away* and aspiring *towards* different media and cultural objects – are illustrative of an increasingly common mode of engaging (or disengaging) with culture and media, which I have dubbed careful consumption. Careful (more than 'care') captures the protective concern – 'full of care' – of such practices, but also the cautious, anxious, serious and even painstaking mental attention I see in the accounts offered by the participants. Careful consumption is the consequence of now well-established themes within ethical consumption – especially notions of fairness, sustainability, labour rights, gender equality, transparency, accountability, kindness and care for the other – being transposed by audiences, uneasily, onto the realm of art, media and culture. The response to such lines of careful thinking and feeling rarely involves extreme outrage or vocal calls to 'cancel', as popular talk of 'cancel culture' might suggest, but rather a range of other much more routine and everyday activities among contemporary audiences. Most participants I spoke with describe simply turning away from certain artists or cultural works, finding new, 'better' and more distinctive options to fill their playlists with, and aspiring to be 'better' people for it.

I talked with 20 participants about how they deal with creative or cultural works they find objectionable on ethical and feminist grounds. Almost all of them describe sensations of discomfort, unease and guilt, and at times anxiety, shame, stress and distress that make them feel simply unable to continue to engage with a text or figure as they once might have. These experiences of discomfort can be usefully understood in terms of what Hemmings (2012) calls 'affective dissonance', and even 'an ethic of discomfort' (Foucault, 2001 [1979]). Hemmings uses the term to describe how strong, negative emotional reactions, which might begin as quite individual and personal experiences, can nevertheless lead us to make connections with broader systemic oppression. Building on Hemmings' claims, this study shows how bad feelings – guilt, discomfort, unease – can be a part of a process to 'learn more about the reality that I may have missed' (Antonia) or 'sharpen a fuzzy consciousness' (Foucault, 2001 [1979]: 445), reaffirming existing (if at times nascent) feminist ethical reflection and reasoning. At the same time, the participants often turn these feelings back on themselves in ways that seem unduly self-critical, such as feeling personally ashamed, guilty or sheepish for having merely watched or enjoyed a piece of popular culture. Participants understand their discomfort in terms of personal failures both to *feel correctly* and *choose correctly* (now, in the past and potentially in the future). In these ways, the more radical prospects of affective dissonance remain tempered by the broader logics of ethical consumer and postfeminist discourses, with their emphasis on self-empowerment, personal choice and individual responsibility.

Affective dissonance – sensations of discomfort, conflict, guilt, worry – produces an agitated and uneasy form of ethical reflection. In response, careful audiences 'cancel', avoid and quit certain texts or artists, and ultimately aspire to correct and optimise their habits of cultural consumption. We might then think of ugly news about once-beloved artists and culture figures and the discomforting feelings that are increasingly associated

with these objects as 'orientation devices', to use Ahmed's (2006) terms. Discomfort and dissonance are disorienting sensations, which compel careful audiences to find their way again and, very often, to redirect their attention and affections elsewhere. However these (re)orientation practices can be contradictory, ambivalent and not always clear in their motivations or intentions. Careful audiences might deliberately and purposefully stop giving their time and attention to a specific cultural text or figure – they 'quit', 'cancel', 'screen' and 'avoid' – but equally they might simply find themselves drifting away such that they are no longer 'actively' engaged. Likewise careful audiences aspire to *be better* and *choose better*. Again, this may be done very deliberately and intentionally, such as by leveraging devices and apps to help them track, scrutinise, critique and correct their choices as cultural consumers. For others, better choices are seen more as a reflection of their natural or maturing tastes. All are examples of a careful consumer politics because they reveal an awareness of and willingness to leverage the value of audience attention/regard/disregard within the economic logics of the contemporary media and communications industries, with their 'engagement paradigms' and emphasis on valuable circuits of attention, visibility and discoverability.

In this paper I have provided initial findings from a study of how self-identified ethical and feminist audiences are negotiating and rationalising their increasingly cautious and thoughtful engagement with what they choose to regard. These findings extend our understanding of both of ethical consumption practices and media and cultural audiences. They provide another account of 'actually existing' ethical consumption practices and resist the hyperbole and media panic surrounding 'cancel culture' to reveal instead the more routine and commonplace behaviours and experiences of contemporary audiences. Careful consumers engage in an 'ethical problematisation' of their audienceship and consumption of media and cultural texts. They direct analytical attention to areas of their own behaviour and conduct, which they reflect on and in so doing identify aspects of their own behaviour they would like to change, and they set about doing that work to transform themselves into the ethical individuals they aspire to be. These reflections are channelled by the participants into practices of self-control but also self-improvement. Careful consumers continually 'work on themselves', in *both* aspirationally ethical and enterprising senses. Of course, it likely comes as little surprise that these consumer shifts and aspirations, with all their affective energy and activity, are also being accommodated, catered to and produced by the media and cultural industries. This is apparent everywhere, from high profile use of on-set 'intimacy coordinators' or 'gender equity consultants', to UX gimmicks like Spotify's 'Do not play this artist' option, to content platform curation like Netflix's Black Lives Matter and NAIDOC themed playlists, to social media apps like Letterboxd that leverage the tracking and self-transformation habits of careful consumers. It is on this last concern, how do the media and cultural industries respond to the figure of the careful consumer – that I think lines of potential future research are necessarily and usefully directed.

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